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AUTHOR McClellan, Dorinda Ann; McClellan, Leslie
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ABSTRACT

The need for assistance to develop study habits and skills, and related learning problems, as perceived by 246 students enrolled in an urban community college, were the focus of this report. The subjects, all registered in a developmental reading class, were administered a self-analysis survey of learning efficiency gauging the need for assistance in study management, course-related skills, auxiliary course skills, attitudes, interests, habits, and physiological aspects of learning. Through proper identification of student perceptions of skill-mastery levels, maximization of learning potential through selective skills training can be accomplished. (KS)

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Dorinda Ann McClellan
Hillsborough Community College
Tampa, Florida 33622

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The Need For Study Skills As Perceived By Community College Students

Dorinda Ann McClellan
Hillsborough Community College

Leslie McClellan
University of South Florida

Introduction

Educators have long recognized the lack of adequate study skills either possessed or practiced by freshmen in college. Literature is replete with methods or techniques for helping the student to become better prepared for the collegiate academia. Although this material may consist of expounding certain specific tasks such as the classic SQ3R by Robinson or notetaking by Howe (1974) to so-called speed reading achievements, the disparities among the writers appear to be more convergent than divergent. For example, Pauk (1973) contends that many college reading programs spend precious time on questionable techniques

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of teaching speed reading whereas Lesnik (1972) points out that the speed problem is in actuality a result of other problems such as lack of concentration, inefficient study habits, and lack of background in the material being studied.

Sherman (1971) recognizes the problem of ascertaining the study skill needs of students which Ahrendt (1975) thinks is made even more difficult because the community college student has learned to mask effectively the symptoms and deficiencies he has in learning. The most frequently employed instruments for investigating and measuring these study skill needs are checklists, questionnaires, compositions, inventories, and interviews. By these methods much subjective information about students' study skills and work habits has been collected. While these checklists and questionnaires are often subject to severe limitations, they are in extensive use by most investigators but Gordon (1941) feels they are an attempt to obtain an objective measurement of the study skills of college students.

Plotsky (1974) maintained that each adult learner has his own difficulties to overcome and that one of the most haunting problems for many adults is the fear that they do not have the ability to study, to concentrate, or to remember. Many of these problems stem from a poor self-concept, perhaps from a previously poor or unsuccessful learning experience. She concludes that the self-concept of the student returning to education is of importance in influencing ability to learn and interest in learning. The literature likewise suggests that the self-concept can be changed but a positive image of self-as-a-student that the adult brings to the

educational experience is necessary for the adult to benefit from a new educational enterprise.

This report is concerned with the need for assistance in study habits, skills, and related learning problems as perceived by two hundred forty-six community college students enrolled in an urban community college. The subjects, both male and female, ranged in age from eighteen years to sixty-five years with diverse backgrounds of work experiences, career aspirations, and educational potential. The instrument used in this study was the Survey of Reading/Study Efficiency designed by Frank L. Christ (1968) and published by the Science Research Associates. The subjects, all registered in a Developmental Reading class, were administered this self-analysis of learning efficiency as it is affected by study habits, classroom skills, physical environment, and reading attitudes, interests, and habits. The author describes the Survey as a practical and operational tool to deal with problems relating specifically to reading and study skills and habits. Identification of five major reading-study problem areas is accomplished through 144 items which are further subdivided into more specific elements. The distribution of frequency of responses indicating the student-perceived need for assistance in the different areas (study management, course related skills, auxilliary course skills, attitudes, interests, and habits, and physiological aspects) constitutes the discussion of this paper.

I. STUDY MANAGEMENT

The aspect of study management as good study habits is frequently neglected although its importance is seldom challenged. Success in study management depends on two factors classified as time management and study environment. Many students study at the wrong times and under the worst circumstances. The benefits of distributed practice, review, and overlearning are unknown to one-third of the study population. Although students do not maintain a balance of activity between study and recreation we find that only six per cent of these students do not allow time for relaxation and recreation.

According to unsolicited followup responses made by students, the references given in the student response sheet to the survey provide insight and invaluable direction for assistance in scheduling and establishing priorities which were hitherto unknown to them.

II. MAJOR COURSE-RELATED SKILLS

Only twenty-four percent of the students indicated problems with Study-Reading techniques. However, half of them do not utilize auxiliary course materials when they have problems with their textbooks. In addition to the various study techniques in vogue today, students are assisted in studying in their own textbooks which they are encouraged to bring into class.

Marking and underlining seem to be a problem for about one-third of the students. Systematic instruction in the technique of underlining is needed to help students get more out of their textbooks (Adams, 1970, 20).

Making notes and listening to lectures followed by summarizing the notes and lectures seem to cause most of the difficulty for these students. The importance of this skill can be judged when one reflects that a full-time student spends over 200 hours a semester listening to class lectures. Out-of-class study time is needed less when students learn to "make" rather than "take" notes in a responsive way. In the case of relatively mature learners, simple instructions may provide sufficient guidance for the adoption of effective procedures for the taking of notes (Howe, 1974).

Apparently because students need little urging to recognize the importance of testing, only one-fifth of them indicated problems with taking tests. About one-half of them had not established a pre-exam routine although all but seven in the sampling said they read over an exam before beginning to answer the questions.

III. AUXILIARY COURSE SKILLS

Although knowledge of the use of the library is considered a skill necessary for academic effectiveness, about half of the population reported they do not use a library once a week, cannot compile a bibliography independently, are not familiar with the school library, and cannot use the common indices although they can use a card catalog to look up a book. Although eighty-four per cent of the students said they use a dictionary to look up words, nearly one third of them said they do not make lists of strange or unknown words which they encounter.

About twenty-two per cent of the students indicated they realize a need

for improvement of general vocabulary but almost fifty per cent of the population stated unfamiliar technical words cause difficulty in reading subject matter. Specialized vocabularies are more effectively taught within the context of the content areas. Retention of vocabulary is dependent upon need, experience, practice, and satisfaction (Rauch, 1971).

IV. ATTITUDES, INTERESTS AND HABITS

The area of reading habits and interests must be investigated particularly because many students are not aware of the fact that reading is not only a necessary academic skill for learning and broadening their interests but can also be a pleasurable and stimulating experience. One hundred thirty of our population stated they have not read more than three books in the last two months and only one third of them read daily newspapers or a variety of other reading material. These students need to be given fresh insight and motivation by reading books which will create an interest in reading, by the provision of opportunities to read, by discussing books with a teacher who enjoys reading, and by having accessible titles that match subject matter with interests. It seems likely that significant changes in habits and attitudes must occur if lasting changes in reading proficiency are to become a reality (Smith, Drummond, Pinette, 1975).

About half of the students feel they have difficulty selecting important points in reading and the same number feel they read slower than most other students. These students need exercises in reading to find the main idea and other general reading improvement activities of which there are numerous examples. It is significant to note that only eight per cent of this population said they read everything at the same rate. Almost one-half

of the students reported they have difficulty in settling down to study or in studying without being affected by various distractions. This may be accounted for by the fact that they stated they have difficulty remembering the facts studied and often memorize rather than understand the material. Probably one of the most alarming facts brought out by the survey was that one-third of these students report that they do not like to study. Recommendations are made for sending this latter group to counseling or program advising. Let us hope that providing these students with some aids for more effective study will help them to overcome this dislike for a most important activity for anyone enrolled in college. However, nine people out of the total group said they did not think their study habits could be improved.

A recent National Report stated that conferences with students enrolled in college reading classes and studies of their academic backgrounds indicate that many have no occupational goals (Open Admissions ..., 1972). However, only eighteen per cent of our population stated they have not make a career choice and ninety-two per cent of them have not considered changing their major course of study.

V. PHYSIOLOGICAL ASPECTS

This final area covers the principal problems relating to general health, vision, and the physiological act of reading. Students are often not aware of the deleterious effect of poor health and bad vision on their ability to study effectively. Although twenty-four per cent of the students said they had not had a medical checkup in the past year, twenty-four per cent of them said that they are so nervous or tense or tired and sleepy that

they have difficulty studying. Yet ten per cent of the population said they had a physical condition that made studying difficult. In looking at the items which deal specifically with the vision aspects we find 108 of the students feel that their eyes are too tired after reading a couple of hours and, fortunately, only 15 students have difficulty seeing the blackboard.

The act of reading is described by Christ as oculomotor. When a reader is either perceptually lazy or inefficient in his eye-page relationship, he spends a disproportionate amount of time reading, becomes bored or frustrated, thus leads to less and less reading which may in part account for their distaste for studying discussed earlier. Not only is insight into the problem important, but also changes in reading behavior must be effected to help this problem. Almost fity per cent of the students stated they frequently hear the sounds of words which they are reading. This may be partly accounted for because they also said they read word by word or syllable by syllable. However, less than ten per cent of the students ever reread to be sure they have understood. Students who indicated severe subvocalization practices are assigned tachistoscopic training exercises and scheduled for the Reading Eye Test.

Summary

The perception of the need for study skills of community college students is as varied and unique as the students interests, abilities, and educational background. It behooves us as educators to ascertain these study skills needs of each student as expeditiously as possible and to make sound professional recommendations whereby they can rectify these academic barriers as early in the community college experience as possible.

The students in this population indicated difficulty with spelling, technical vocabulary, comprehension, library research, marking and underlining, attitude toward reading, and scheduling.

Those areas covered by this survey which seem to cause the least concern for the students is flexibility in reading, choice of careers, attitudes toward school, and classroom testing.

Students in this sample do not find adequate time for studying yet they provide for ample recreational and relaxation periods. One half of the students do not utilize auxiliary course materials when needed. Making notes and listening to lectures as well as summarizing the notes and lectures causes problems for these students although only one-fifth of the population reported trouble with test taking. About one half of the population cannot and do not utilize the library and its resources, and the same number experience difficulty with technical vocabulary. A majority of the students have not experienced reading books and only one-third of them read daily newspapers. Nearly one-half of them stated their eyes tire after reading a couple of hours. One-third of the students do not like to study, about one-half of them have difficulty in selecting the most important points. Only eighteen per cent had not made a career

choice and ninety-two per cent were not considering changing their course of study.

An instrument of this type must be viewed with caution because of the subjective nature of the data obtained. Additional testing and/or observations must be utilized in order to determine the accuracy of a student's self-assessment. For example, a student may think he is familiar with his school library but he may in fact have no concept of the wealth of materials, references, aids, and other services available for his use.

O'Reilly (1973) contends that people strive to perform at a level which is consistent with their perceptions of their abilities. Through proper identification of these perceptions, providing the student with means for overcoming these problems, stimulating the student's interests and further cultivating these interests into an effective program of study for the student, we hope to maximize the learning potential of each individual student.

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